

DIRTY DEEDS DONE DIRT CHEAP

A D G S
CRIME
ZINE

A DGS Crime Zine



FOREWORD

Thank you for downloading Dirty Deeds Done Cheap, a DGS Crime Zine! We truly appreciate your support. Our mods and contributors have spent a great deal of time on this project and we are delighted that you have decided to support us.

We want to thank all of our creators as well for crafting such fantastic stories from their artwork to their stories of the characters we all love. We appreciate the dedication, time and effort placed in each part of this project.

We ask that because this is a free zine if there was a piece you especially loved to let the creator know and support them in their future endeavors. We have made sure every piece is high quality and we hope you find the range of takes on crime a delightful one.

With our varying creators, we preface that this zine will be tagged with triggers, but as a general rule, there is a fair amount of blood, dark comedy, angst and murder throughout this project. There is also a lot of spoilers throughout. With that being said, thank you once again! We hope you enjoy!

Sincerely,

D4C Mod Team

Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap: A DGS Crime Zine is an unofficial fan project and is in no way affiliated with Capcom or Shu Takumi

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The Grave Turnabout

Written By Ana

Content Warnings:
death, mourning, mentions of violence,
desecration of a grave, swearing

Irises freefall onto the stone. Their petals drifted away, dusting the grass.

It was unceremonious for such an elegant altar, but the hand holding them let them slip. Ceremoniousness was impossible when grief turned its bearer's limbs to thick tar and lead, weighing them down and sending the offering in scatters.

Susato didn't remember that time; she had been an infant, cradled in his other arm. Her grandmother had recounted the sight to her at some point. She was very young, seeing as she couldn't remember it—only that she had known this mental image her whole life, and that her grandmother had watched it firsthand from a distance.

Every year, Susato made her own visits. She brought irises and ichigo daifuku, her mother's favourites. She laid the gifts neatly on her mother's grave.

She didn't cry. This was life, and she steeled herself in the face of it.

NO. 139.

No name, no tended grass, no flowers for ten years.

He had a name and he wouldn't let Britain grieve it.

Kneeling at the grave, Kazuma wrote his father's name in Japanese. The prison staff wouldn't care enough to wipe the ink away, but the rain would wash it out sooner or later.

He would come back, though, and inscribe it again in silent ritual.

When Ryuunosuke returned to London, Gina dragged him along on just about every excursion that crossed her mind. Sometimes they went out to drink or to window-shop; when it was the latter, they'd often return with a trinket or two stowed away in Gina's pockets. Some excursions, however, were more sombre—like the time she urged him to help her mark the graves of her deceased friends.

"I wanna mark this one," Gina said, pointing at a patch of dirt in a corner of Stepney. It was no larger than three square feet. "And this one."

The boss' grave had a name plaque with his living years on it and his title. That grave was the closest thing Gina would ever have to a shrine.

'Ondo accompanied her to the kids' graves in the slums, and Iris and Holmes made plaques. Soon enough, the patch of ground behind the abandoned factory was littered with shrines.

They had been seen as less than nothing in life. Gina wanted to make sure their memory wasn't forgotten in death.

Klimt had many visitors. One was constant. One was new—very small at first, and always holding an adult's hand, but she grew up fast. Another lingered for a minute and simply stared.

Oh, how Klimt wished to rest alongside his Isadora.

A year out from that case, and still Mr. Naruhodou and his friends found a way to crowd themselves in Maria's office.

They were there on another case. Well, that had been the original plan. Where it brought them was the coroner's office at six o'clock in the evening: seven people, snooping and conversing as they pondered Mr. Roland N. Hisgrave's untimely death.

Naturally, Maria had had enough.

"There are too many of you in here," she said in a voice equally bright and sharp. Her eyes rolled heavenward in vexation. "You'll all suffocate on the fumes."

The ammonia and alcohol should've dispelled them long ago. If not that, then the preserved organs and taxidermied birds. But the group had turned up for an investigation, and now they lingered as if desensitised to all this.

Maria valued her space. It was calm and quiet and, best of all, hers. If she were honest, though, this strange company did pique her interest. Miss Mikotoba and Iris struck up a conversation with her (What was floating in that jar over there? Where did she get that skeleton?), but they would distract themselves easily enough if they felt they'd started to overstep. The detectives were as nosy as ever, though one favoured the chemicals, and the other preferred asking her question upon question, eyes glistening with every word she spoke. As for the lawyers...well, the Naruhodou one was having his back-and-forth with Miss Mikotoba as per usual, and just as much banter with Mr. Asougi; meanwhile, Lord van Zieks steadied himself in a corner as if ailed with anaemia—

Why were they here?

Some kind of tension had settled in the air, but it wasn't among the group itself. Everyone seemed jittery and restless.

A week ago, the former Lord Chief Justice had made his final visit here—as a corpse. He'd been buried not long after. Maria and her cleaver had awaited that day for her mother's sake for far too long. This lot had likely felt the same. Even so, there was an unease to it, like they were waiting for the news that Stronghart and Jigoku had escaped somehow despite the numerous witnesses to their demise.

More pressing, though, was what that meant for Maria's schedule today. Mama's fate was sealed; she claimed so, anyhow, whether her daughter believed it or not.

She wished to visit her as often as possible before time ran out. That would mean closing up shop at the office early, and, well—her visitors would just have to deal with that.

"Go," she said, pushing the nearest person's—Lestrade's—shoulder toward the side door. "I've somewhere to be."

"To the Lowgate Cemetery, then," Miss Mikotoba announced with a glance at her book. She pressed a finger to her chin in thought. "The graffiti left on Mr. Hisgrave's gravestone could use another glance, and it isn't far."

So they were going the same way, towards the prison. Maria stowed her tools away, save for her favourite cleaver, and locked the door behind them. She spent much of the walk curiously observing the others, wondering what she would find if she dissected them.

When they arrived, she hesitated between the cemetery and the prison.

The others gathered around Mr. Hisgrave's gravestone. Lestrade and Asougi began to bicker; the former punched his arm with the exasperation of an angry puppy.

As Maria disappeared into the prison, she felt an odd warmth tug at her chest.

She wouldn't be the same without everyone on the defence team and their prying.

"Well?" Mama asked. "Did you have any interesting cadavers lately?"

Maria thought of the past week. "Certainly."

Stronghart's brain had been no different than any other; his muscles hadn't been particularly cooperative, either. Really, it was the satisfaction of being able to conduct that particular autopsy that had made the effort worth it. She'd considered stealing the corpse for experimentation, but something stopped her every time.

It might've been her desire for truth. Maria knew, deep in her heart, that that defence team had dug up the entire truth in court, that no new truths would come of Stronghart's exhumation. It would be an act fueled purely by malice, and if she did it...well, there'd be no corpse left for Mr. Naruhodou and his group of friends to curse at. That wouldn't have mattered to her a year ago, but it did now.

She bid her mother farewell quickly with a smile and a promise to keep her up-to-date on the medical journals.

She promised to tell her about her friends, too.

It was dark out: she'd best go home to her and Mama's much-too-empty house, sharpen her cleaver, feed bugs to her lovely Ariadne—

A ruckus broke out from the direction of the cemetery. Maria tilted her head.

....Boisterous laughter?

The prison guards seemed to startle a bit, then chuckle as one of them shoved the other. "Still fink it's a rumour? 'Bout the ghost?" The former said.

Maria gave a little sigh. Her—no, no, not hers, Mr. Naruhodou's—friends were lucky the guards were so damn gullible. Still, she slipped her way into the cemetery, curiosity piqued.

The others should've been at Mr. Hisgrave's grave, but the spot was empty. Maria peered in the direction of the noise, and it led her to the west corner. Sure enough, the others were huddled there—everyone laughing and jesting, save Lord van Zieks...

Damn it. Maria's gaze fell on the headstone, the one Miss Mikotoba was kicking at present.

This was that bastard's grave. Stronghart's.

"If I only had—" Miss Mikotoba was saying, "tossed him—while he was alive!"

Maria stared. Miss Mikotoba curled her hands into fists, and her smile faded.

The laughter died down, and an awkward silence fell over the group.

Maria knew she shouldn't stare, but well, people were too fascinating—these ones more than most. Fiddling with her knife out of habit, she searched for something to say before settling for, "You're all very lucky you haven't been caught, you know."

As Mr. Holmes darted behind a tree and Lord van Zieks began to murmur some kind of lament—something about 'propriety'—it was Mr. Naruhodou who spoke up. "I—I—" the man broke into a cold sweat. "Look, it started with Gina...she got distracted..."

To Maria's surprise, Lestrade didn't flinch at the accusation.

"Sure, I did," she began. It was then that her voice wavered, suddenly sounding dry. "I mean, it—it—"

"It's Stronghart's grave, and you couldn't pass up the opportunity," Maria cut in.

"Yeah," Lestrade said, folding her arms over her chest. "C-can you blame me, though?" Facial expressions were hard; Maria couldn't always parse them. Without a doubt, though, she could see the tears piercing Lestrade's eyes. And when she scanned the others' faces...well, Mr. Asougi was unreadable, but he had a hand on Miss Mikotoba's shoulder; Mr. Naruhodou seemed to be observing

her in turn; they'd been having fun, but the emotions behind all this were serious.

And she understood.

Desecrating the grave of the head of London's judiciary? It wasn't a terrible idea. It was a good compromise, too, between digging up his body and leaving it undisturbed from its slumber. They would leave him in the earth, it seemed, while haunting it from above.

"I want to join," Maria said, drawing the mask down to obscure her face.

Iris stood up with a jolt, no longer sullen. "I knew you would!" she exclaimed, skipping over to Maria. "Hm...Where should we start?" She paused, then fiddled with her grenade launcher. "Do you suppose...It would be kind of fun to attack Mr. Lord Chief Injustice now that we can. But my pink glitter's too fashionable for him, don't you think?"

"This girl is frightening..." Mr. Naruhodou muttered. Iris only beamed in response.

"Old on," Gina interrupted. "Give me that 'cartridge' thin' that's in there, Iris."

Iris lit up as Gina's meaning registered. "Genius idea, Ginny!" With a grin, she pried the gun open. A cartridge of pink, shimmery liquid sat in its grooves. In the way a more typical child would disassemble a toy, Iris removed the cartridge and handed it to Gina. "What should we draw? Or write?"

Before her sister could respond, Kazuma reached for the cartridge. "Give me that."

"Oi, it were my idea!"

Kazuma clenched his jaw, and after a moment's hesitation, Gina conceded.

He dipped his finger in the pink glitter and began to draw. Maria tilted her head; he was writing in Japanese script.

Intrigued, Lestrade hovered over his shoulder. "Wot's that mean?"

Kazuma, still gritting his teeth, didn't respond.

Lestrade prodded again. "Wot's it say?!"

"He won't tell you," Iris said, dusting off her dress and taking a seat on one of the narrow stone benches by the wall, "so it's definitely a bad word that he doesn't want you to use on him."

Lestrade huffed. When she was done glaring, she shrugged and dipped her finger in the dye. "Migh' as well tell that arsehole jus' wot I fink 'im."

Miss Mikotoba, who'd tired of throwing kicks and blows, sunk down onto the bench. She turned back to regard the profanities—well, what Maria presumed must be profanities—now scribbled in bright pink across Stronghart's grave.

A devious thought crossed Maria's mind.

I should add something.

What was there to say? It was awfully satisfying to see the words Mr. Asougi had written across the stone and the messier ones added on by Lestrade, but Maria had less of a way with words. When she thought of that disgusting man, she saw tampered corpses, the furrowed brow of her mother, the relentlessness in Mr. Naruhodou's eyes as he parsed apart her own family's lies...

Rather than draw, Maria chose to stalk up onto the dirt where Lord Stronghart lay. She stood there like a watchful bird, knife in hand, as the others vandalised.

"Isn't it so thrilling?"

She looked up, and Miss Mikotoba's eyes were gleaming again.

From her sleeve, Miss Mikotoba produced a small pink box. "I bought these earlier," she said somberly, bowing her head as if she were holding something of great value. "They were supposed to be for after we wrapped things up and went home, but..." Miss Mikotoba looked back up, then smiled. "I suppose we are not going back just yet. Would you like one?"

"What are they?" Maria gestured with her cleaver.

Susato opened the box, producing from it some kind of small, pale pink sweet. "Ichigo daifuku. We can think of it as...an offering to ourselves, can't we? After everything—Wait your turn!" She shooed Mr. Naruhodou and Mr. Holmes away, then extended the box toward Maria.

An offering to themselves, even though they weren't dead. Interesting.

It was a strawberry wrapped in some kind of chewy, sweet paste. Maria didn't exactly have a sweet tooth, but she liked it.

Lestrade abandoned her work for a bite of mochi. She leaned against Mr. Naruhodou's shoulder. "Ria was right, eh? The officers should've come an' arrested us." She laughed. "If it's the pair I'm finkin' of, they wouldn't bat an eye if King Edward dropped from the sky and landed on 'is arse in fron' of 'em."

"It was," Maria said, and the others chuckled through mouthfuls of sweets.

"Fear not!" Mr. Holmes called from some distance away, sounding rather as if he were in a tree. "We needn't worry in case of arrest, for I have bribed the prosecution in advance."

Lord van Zieks made a noise of protest, but it was promptly cut off by Mr. Naruhodou. "I'm not defending us," he said. "It's not like

we did much work to obscure our identities," he added with a gesture at the stone.

"Well then," Mr. Asougi said, a barely-visible smile on his face. "We will have to not get caught."

Maria agreed. She settled down on the bench, staring at each of them. This was... nice. Warm.

A light whisper startled her from her basking. It was Miss Mikotoba, no doubt talking to herself. "Do you think we...did something wrong?" She stole a glance at the grave. It practically glowed pink, the words "FUCK OFF" unmistakable.

"We did not," Maria said, causing Miss Mikotoba to jump. "He deserved it, didn't he?"

"E deserved worse!" Lestrade called. Mr. Asougi nodded—damn, he agreed with her for once!—and soon enough the others all joined in with hums of assent.

Maria hadn't been on a picnic for a while; the last time had been three years ago, with Mama. Certainly, this was no proper picnic.

The others flocked into a huddle to grab more mochi, and Maria decided then and there that she ought to picnic with them in dark graveyards more often.

The End



Art by Cas Lynn

BREAKING THE CASE

WRITTEN BY
VALENTINE

My dear fellow, must we do this?"

M The pitch black streets of London were daunting, even with the occasional glimmer of light from lanterns and windows. Such light did not reach the alleyway in which the duo were crouching. Mikotaba couldn't help but glance between the entrance and his partner, who was busy picking a lock.

"Now isn't the time for cold feet, Partner. That meddlesome new inspector would not let me investigate the victim's home," Holmes whispered, voice dripping with irritation.

There was a mystery to be solved just behind this door, and yet he couldn't reach it! He must practice picking locks more often so that he could do this more quickly. Time was of the essence, so he couldn't waste it failing at his newest skill.

"Yes, but what do you think you'll find that you don't already know? You've already deduced this to be a murder, not an accident. And if we're caught the inspector will jail us both until the case is closed," Mikotaba answered quietly while checking again for any approaching policemen on their beats, "or longer..."

It was certainly true that Holmes had already deduced nearly the whole case from start to

finish. Two men entered the abode, only one man left. The victim was a well known and wealthy collector of various expensive items. The most probable explanation was a bargain that one party was not particularly pleased with. The only trouble was that the victim appeared to have a medical condition that led to his death, yet the man had been perfectly healthy up until that point. It was entirely suspicious. Even more confusing, there had been no sign of foul play or injury.

"Unfortunately, none yet trust my brilliant mind. Thus, the burden of proof lays on my shoulders. But it's no matter, for soon they will understand how I am the greatest of all detect!"

"Someone's coming!" Mikotaba interrupted, pushing Holmes to be as flush to the wall as possible.

The pair waited in silence as footsteps echoed across cobblestone streets. It paused at the end of the alleyway as they held their breath and remained still against the wall. Mikotaba was certain his heart was beating loud enough for all to hear. It would only be a matter of moments before the footsteps came towards them.

Then what? Do they attempt to run? Fight? Feign ignorance?

Echoing footsteps finally began anew, thankfully away from the pair and their poor hiding place. The partners remained silent until they could no longer hear the steady boots of the policeman.

"You've nothing to prove, Holmes, least of all your brilliance," Mikotoba continued as they began their work anew.

"Why, thank you, Partner," Holmes smiled at the other at as the lock finally clicked, "now let us find what awaits us here."

Silently, the pair entered the kitchen of the house. Remnants of life and criminal investigation littered the place. Nothing would ease the eerie feeling of being inside a dead man's home, especially not with the nauseating smell that permeated the room.

Knowing better than to light a candle, Holmes began his investigation by pulling on his newest invention. It was far from perfect, but his see-in-the-dark goggles managed to function most of the time without burning him. He only needed to use them long enough to find a clue.

Mikotoba glanced around the room. Nothing was apparently obvious, especially in the dark. Yet, there was that smell lingering in the air. He couldn't yet place it, but the scent was vaguely familiar to him.

As they knew already, the murder took place in the victim's home in the middle of the day. His body had been discovered by his maid, who had been running errands for the past hour or two. Within a small window of time, the murderer had gotten into the home, killed the man, and left without much trouble or resistance. Did the victim have guests regularly for none of the neighbors to take note of one particular guest that they now knew was a killer?

"Aha!" Holmes said suddenly while crossing into the parlor, as the door had been open between the two rooms, "look at this, Mikotoba." He immediately lifted a small jar from underneath one of the chairs.

"Now, what could this be...?" he muttered to himself as he began to think.

"Shall we deduce it together?" Mikotoba said as he held his hand out to the other.

"But of course!" Holmes began, taking the other's offered hand, "As we were able to see from the windows earlier today, there was no obvious sign of a struggle, but we know that the body was found in this very room meaning..."

"That the victim must have invited the murderer inside, perhaps even knew them personally. But then the question becomes *why* and *how*," Mikotoba continued, easily falling into step.

"The *why* is simple. The victim had a considerable collection of embalmed animals, some of which were quite rare and expensive. All the shelves in this room are empty, meaning whomever killed this man also stole the collection. As for *how*..."

"This jar you've found, let me see it," Mikotoba asked as he peered at the jar, finally recognizing the scent up close, "Ah, formaldehyde. Perfect for preserving various specimens, however the jar is nearly empty. When ingested, such a thing can cause bleeding in the throat and lungs, which matches the autopsy findings."

"Now, my dear Mikotoba, did you read those files despite being strictly forbidden from doing so?" Holmes asked, his smile teasing as he leaned closer to the other.

"...Your curiosity is infectious, Holmes," Mikotoba answered, a tad embarrassed. He'd scolded Holmes for similar actions, after all.

"Haha! Well, now I believe we can confidently say our victim was forced to drink this poison by the man who's stolen his prized collection!"

The pair smiled at each other as their dance ended. One mystery solved with a flourish, as always. But there was still one small problem...

"Holmes, now that we know the *how* and probable *why*, should we not deduce the *whom*?" Mikotoba said, beginning to realize they had forgotten something rather important.

That seemed to deflate Holmes' celebratory mood. Shoulders slumped for a moment as he, too, realized his oversight. How could he have missed something so critical?

The drop in mood only lasted a moment. He stood up straight again and began searching the room anew. If their "dedicated" police force had failed to notice the murder weapon, then they had likely missed something else.

"Since the various specimens are gone, we can assume those were the target all along," Holmes began as he paced the room, "few would care about such things unless they knew the monetary or scientific value. As such, they're very difficult to sell unless there's many who know these values..."

Mikotoba thought for a moment before gasping in realization.

"The paper! Two days ago, the paper announced an exhibition for rare animals, alive and dead alike. There was even to be an auction!" he announced as the pieces connected in his mind.

Immediately, Holmes was upon him, clutching his partner's shoulders tightly. "Brilliant, Mikotoba!" he declared, "the murderer *must* be intending to sell our victims collection at that very place! Where else would he have such an opportunity? We need only know what he will sell, and we will have him!"

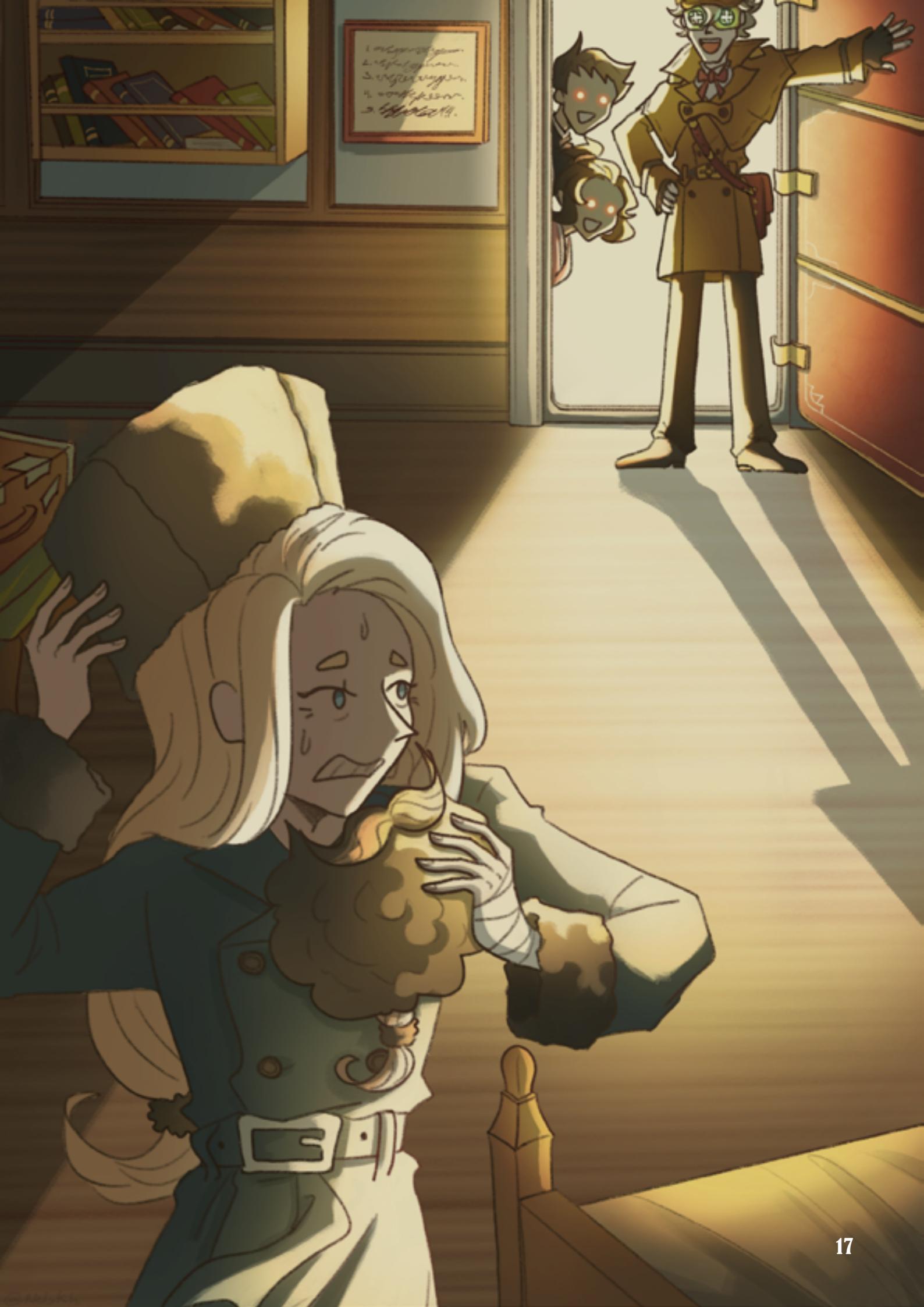
"I imagine the maid would likely know what they looked like," Mikotoba said, Holmes' excitement infectious, "we only need to ask her for a proper list of what to look for and the man is ours! But... the auction is tomorrow..."

"Then we have no time to lose!" Holmes announced before turning to leave, "we must find this maid, obtain the information we seek, then catch this man in the act! Surely, our dear friend Gregson will be pleased."

"Certainly, I can see his fists clenched tightly about his fish and chips already. We really ought to treat him to one with how many we cause him to ruin," Mikotoba laughed, "now, let us get back to Baker's Street before we're caught, shall we?"

"Onward, Partner! For in the morning, we have a murder to bring to light!" Holmes declared as the pair dashed back into the night.

THE END



(Dis)Honest Reparations

Written By Ela

Content Warnings:
racism, classism, swearing

All it took was one party for Ryuunosuke to realize he wasn't a fan of a traditional British ball.

He barely knew how to dance, and there were too many unspoken rules he felt he must be breaking. The bustling, haughty crowd around him meant too many eyes focused on each of his mistakes, and his anxieties came bubbling to the surface far too quickly. This probably stemmed from the fact he was the only foreigner present at the ball; Ryuutarou was busy with a case, and Kazuma had long since abandoned both him and the party after nearly pulling his sword on one of the nobles in a fit of annoyance.

Ryuunosuke couldn't blame him. Even after working with the prosecutor's office for so long, the British aristocracy made it clear they still thought Kazuma didn't belong there. Ryuunosuke wanted to leave too, but unlike Kazuma, he didn't have the luxury of his station as a worker for the Crown.

The host had invited him for defending his son from a murder charge, and since he was only here in London for a limited time, it would have been especially rude for him to decline the generous offer, even if he suspected it was more out of propriety than anything else.

Now, Ryuunosuke was sitting in a corner hoping no one would talk to him, and wondering if it was late enough that he was allowed to leave without it being inappropriate.

"Oi, move over."

Ryuunosuke jumped at Gina's voice addressing him and quickly complied with her request, scooting over on his precious bench to give his friend room to sit.

She flopped down in an undignified manner, her elegant dark green dress bunching under her at the ungainly movement, and sighed, "I can't stand a second more o' listenin' to the Reaper chattin' wiv all these nobles."

"Why were you with him in the first place? I figured you would have preferred to stay by yourself."

Ryuunosuke hadn't seen much of Gina since Kazuma left. Honestly, he had assumed she left with him.

"Aven't you 'eard? Ladies ain't supposed to go anywhere wivout an *escort*," she grumbled, rolling her eyes with disdain. "An' since Kaz left and you're the only other bloke I know 'ere, you get to be my new one."

"Well, thank you for the honor," he drawled.

"Yer damn right it is. I'm the best lady 'ere!"

Ryuunosuke laughed, but still noted, "I do think you're probably the most... unique one here."

Gina punched his arm. "That be'ter be a good thing."

"Trust me, I much prefer you hitting me than being called a 'surprisingly talented Eastern fellow'."

She patted his back in commiseration. She probably didn't quite understand how it felt, but the sentiment of her condolences was appreciated nevertheless.

They slipped into silence after that, enjoying the quiet of each other's company. No one tried to talk to them for a while. Ryuunosuke supposed the two of them made an unapproachable pair: a brash inspector from the East End and an awkward lawyer from Japan.

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted their peace, and he straightened up into a proper posture, preparing himself for whatever passive-aggressive comments he was likely going to receive. His new conversation partners turned out to be his client's parents and the ones who invited him, Lord and Lady Alderman.

"Mr. Nara-hodou" —Ryuunosuke tried not to cringe at the lord's poor pronunciation of his name— "Miss Lestrade, I hope you have been enjoying the festivities!"

He stood up, plastering a pleasant smile on his face, and responded, "Yes, it's been a lovely evening. Thank you again for inviting me."

Gina got up as well, halfheartedly smoothing out her dress. "Yeh, it's real nice."

"You are very welcome, and yes, Beatrice did a wonderful job in organizing, no?" Lord Alderman preened and turned to his wife.

The lady fluttered her hands in a show of bashfulness. "You flatter me, dear, but I simply had to do my best to celebrate our son getting free! I'm so glad you're enjoying the ball, Mr. Naru... Sir. It's well deserved for what you did for us."

"Ah, you're welcome, but really, I was just doing my duty for my client."

"Nonsense! I never would have expected such excellent work from someone from such a quaint little country. That prosecutor on the other hand was so barbaric! Treating my poor boy like that..."

Ryuunosuke frowned and objected, "Prosecutor Asougi was just doing his job, and I likely wouldn't have been able to arrive at the truth if he wasn't working with me for that same goal. And he really wasn't *that* mean to him."

If anything, Kazuma had been more outwardly rude to Ryuunosuke than the defendant.

"Yeah, Soggy's on the same side as 'Oddo an' me. We're all just doin' our jobs," Gina added, crossing her arms.

Lady Alderman narrowed her eyes at Gina but kept a forced smile. "Right, of course. I'm thankful to have had such... *hardworking* individuals on the case. I certainly know you must be very dedicated to your job, Miss Lestrade. I can't imagine the Yard would have accepted you otherwise. One must make up for their shortcomings somehow."

"Wot shortcomings? I can read an' write just as good as the rest o' them now!"

"Well, I would hope so. I know the Yard has come on hard times, but not so hard as to need to stoop so low as to hire *illiterate* pickpockets."

Lord Alderman laughed at his wife's comment and Gina bristled, throwing her hands down in a fierce pout.

Before she could say anything inflammatory though, Ryuunosuke stepped in. "If the Yard has been lacking lately, then it's a good thing they have Inspector Lestrade to help pick up everyone else's slack. Anyway, the party has been lovely, but I'm afraid we have to cut our conversation short. I, uh, just remembered that she and I needed to talk to Lord van Zieks about, erm, some post-trial paperwork. Apologies."

He gave a quick bow and looped his arm through Gina's, dragging her away from the irritating couple before she could lash out. He didn't have a specific destination in mind other than to get away from all these people so he skirted the crowd and led the way outside the ballroom into a random hallway off to the side.

Gina was still fuming as they stopped. "It ain't fair! They fink they can laugh at me cuz I ain't fancy like them! So wot if I used to be a diver?"

"Gina... I'm sorry, but I think people like them always care more about where you come from than anything else. It's not fair, but it's true."

"Yeah, well, that don't mean I 'ave to like it!"

"No, but you do have to be nice to them. To their faces anyway. I don't think they would have let me defend their son if I told them what I really thought..."

"Oh yeah? And wot *do* ya fink?"

"Well..." There were quite a few nasty things Ryuunosuke could say, like how entitled and condescending they were, but he settled

on something simple that he thought Gina would appreciate.

"They're cunts."

Predictably, she doubled over and howled with laughter, clutching her stomach; Ryuunosuke couldn't help but join in, albeit more subdued. Once they calmed down, Gina wiped her eyes and snickered, "Well said, Oddo."

"Thanks, but anyway, we could probably just leave now. I don't really care too much for proper etiquette at this point."

"Yeah, it's not like they'll like us any better if we don't," Gina pointed out and looked in either direction of the hallway they were in. "But I don't know 'ow to get out of 'ere wivout goin' back through the way we came."

"Neither do I, but I'm sure we could find our way out eventually if we just pick a direction and go."

"So which way?"

Both directions looked the same to him, seemingly endless stretches of long, plush rugs, beautiful paintings, and ornate lamps, so Ryuunosuke just pointed to the left. "Um, that way?"

Gina shrugged, marching off in the direction he indicated; Ryuunosuke fell into step beside her. Unfortunately, they seemed to have picked the wrong way as every door they came across only led to bathrooms, closets, sitting rooms, bedrooms, and rooms that didn't seem to have any purpose other than to look nice.

As they came across *yet another* bedchamber, instead of closing the door and continuing, Gina went in and flopped face-first on the bed, groaning into the sheets, "Why do rich blokes 'ave to 'ave such big 'ouses?"

Ryuunosuke sat down beside her, resting his chin in his hands as he answered, sighing, "To have more guests and family usually. But also so they can prove how rich they are."

"That's stupid. They should show off 'ow rich they are by givin' all their money out."

"Mmm, but then they couldn't buy all this fancy stuff," he joked, gesturing at all the exquisite furniture around them.

"Yeh..."

Gina abruptly sat up, jumped off the bed, and strolled purposely towards the large dresser against the wall, opening each drawer and rifling through it.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"Lookin' for jewels or somefink," she quipped, not pausing her search.

Ryuunosuke shot to his feet and shouted, "Wha- You're *stealing from them*?! I know they were rude, but don't you think that's too much? We're going to get into terrible trouble if someone finds out!"

"Quit yellin'. We'll only get in trouble if they catch us an' 'ow long do ya fink it'll take for 'em to notice anyfin's gone? This place is so big, I bet they don't even know wot's in this room."

"I see your point but still..." Ryuunosuke glanced at the doorway, feeling like someone was going to come barging in at any minute to yell at them and demand they be arrested. "I think we sh-"

Unfortunately, he was too distracted by watching for any sudden visitors that while moving to stop Gina he tripped over his own feet and tumbled into the dresser, knocking the glass lamp resting on top to the floor and shattering it into a million pieces on the hardwood.

"...Fuck."

"Too late to say we weren't 'ere now," Gina mused with a shit-eating grin.

"I just hope nobody heard that," Ryuunosuke groaned, burying his face in his hands.

After a minute or two of uninterrupted silence, Gina grabbed the unfortunate lamp's matching partner and held it out to him. "If no one 'eard that then I say we can keep doin' wot we like, innit?"

"...You're trying to tell me to break this one too, aren't you?"

"Yep."

Ryuunosuke took it and stared at the beautiful, multicolored glasswork; it really was an impressive piece of art. Sadly for it, he sighed and gave in, dropping it unceremoniously and allowing it to smash into just as many sparkling shards as the other one. He was surprised at the rush of excitement that ran through him.

He wanted to break something else.

Deciding to chase that thrill and completely disregard any propriety he had left, Ryuunosuke walked over to the spindly-legged side table next to the bed and flipped it. Without hesitating, he lifted his foot and brought it down on one of the legs, snapping it off with a loud crack. He kept stomping until it was practically in splinters, savoring the give of the rich wood under his own strength.

"Blimey, wot did that thing do to you?"

Gina's amused voice snapped him back to reality and Ryuunosuke straightened to a rigid posture and blushed furiously. "W-Well, um, I just, er, it felt nice... Sorry."

"Quit bein' so proper. I wanna see wot else ya break."

He winced at the damaged furniture he took his anger out on. "I really should stop..."

"Why?"

He opened his mouth for a rebuttal, but he couldn't think of anything to say. Sure, he could try to lessen the damage, but looking at what he'd already done... Ryuunosuke *really* wanted to keep going. Gina's smug smirk wasn't helping him fight that urge either.

"You're right. I might as well do as much as I like."

She smiled even wider and let out a low, appreciative whistle as Ryuunosuke went over to the bed and snapped off one of the bedposts with a few fierce tugs. With his new makeshift club in hand, he strolled over to the vanity on the opposite wall and swung at the mirror, shattering it completely. The rest of the furniture in the room all became victims of his rampage. It felt *unimaginably* satisfying; each swing offered a much-needed relief from all his pent-up frustration and annoyance from this night. Gina eventually joined him as well, and all too soon there was no further destruction to be done.

"Cor, that felt good!" Gina laughed as she leaned against him in the midst of their mess.

"I think I need to break things more often honestly," Ryuunosuke agreed with a chuckle as he tossed his weapon to the floor.

"Yeah. Still wish we could 'ave found some jewels or somefink."

"You're not going to find any valuables in the guest rooms. Only the main quarters will have items worth stealing."

Ryuunosuke and Gina both froze at the unexpected voice butting into the conversation. Of all people, Dr. Maria Gorey was standing in the doorway, placid and

unfazed by all the damage in front of her, her usual mask not present to hide her features.

"W-We weren't trying to... We were just, um..."

Ryuunosuke sweated, darting his gaze around while Gina just looked at him, regret plastered on her face. Yeah, there was no way they were getting out of this.

"If you'd like, I can show you where they are."

Wait, what?

"Uhh, show us wot?" Gina asked, clearly just as confused as he was.

Gorey tilted her head like it should have been obvious. "The main quarters so you can find things to steal. The Aldermans are fond of throwing parties for the judiciary; I've visited the estate enough times to know where you can find Lady Alderman's jewelry."

Gina just gaped at her while Ryuunosuke blurted, "You want to help us steal from them?!"

"...They have never been very respectful to Mama or me."

"I see..."

"Well, if you're offerin', it'd be rude to refuse," Gina piped up, seemingly recovered from her shock. She walked over to Gorey and looped an arm through hers, exclaiming cheerfully, "Fanks, Doc!"

Gorey glanced down at their interlinked arms but didn't say anything, only turning to Ryuunosuke and asking, "Will you be coming as well?"

"I feel like there's not much of a choice here..."

After making sure the bedroom door was firmly shut behind them, the trio trekked through the mansion's halls at Gorey's

direction, finally ending up in a small but grandly furnished office. She led the way to an ornate cabinet in the corner. It was locked, but under Gina's quick fingers and a hairpin, it opened with a smooth flourish revealing shelves of sparkling accessories on display. Just one of these was likely worth more than what Ryuunosuke made in an entire year.

"Blimey..." Gina whistled in appreciation as she lifted a glittering diamond necklace from its place on a small cushion.

"I don't suppose she really needs *that* much jewelry, do you?" Ryuunosuke commented wryly.

"You know, 'Oddo, yer more fun when yer breakin' the law,' she teased, a big grin on her face as she started grabbing things indiscriminately and shoving them into her dress's pockets. He wondered if Iris had sewn them on just for an occasion such as this.

"I don't think that's a good thing considering I'm supposed to be working with it."

"This isn't interfering with your job, is it?" Gorey added, apparently not expecting an answer, and Ryuunosuke could swear he saw her lips quirk into a slight smile.

It didn't take long for Gina to be satisfied and she got up, her dress shifting with the added weight of her ill-gotten loot, and neatly closed the cabinet, leaving it considerably more bare but not completely empty.

"I advise we get out of here as soon as we can now," Gorey stated, turning and starting a brisk walk to the exit.

"Don't 'ave to tell me twice!"

Their ensuing escape was a bit of a blur; Ryuunosuke was far too concerned about getting caught to focus on what he was doing so he mostly just followed Gina and Gorey while keeping an ear out. They managed to make it out without anyone stopping or questioning them, and they all breathed a sigh of relief once they had grabbed one of the carriages waiting at the front of the estate.

"As... fun as that was, what are you even going to do with all that?" Ryuunosuke asked as he watched the mansion disappear into the distance from the carriage window.

Gina shrugged. "Keep some. Pawn some. I've got some mates in the East End that could 'elp sell em wivout gettin' caught. You can 'ave some too if ya want, 'Ria."

Gorey looked up in thought. "Thank you for the offer. I think I will take at least one. As a souvenir."

"A souvenir of an exciting adventure, huh?" Ryuunosuke mused, leaning his head back and yawning. He couldn't wait to get back to Baker Street and curl up in bed, and as he rested his eyes he drifted off to sleep from the lull of the carriage and his companion's conversation.

The End



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In Soseki's life, books had been the one consistent thing he could always rely on for comfort. No matter how lonely he was or how terrible his circumstances, he knew he could always trust a good story to make him feel better and forget about his hardships. Even if it was only for a little while, that was everything he sometimes needed.

So surely no one could blame him that, in the most dire part of his life, he wasted no time surrounding himself with what gave him the most happiness: Literature.

Oh, and a little calico cat, that is. Even though he had been an unplanned addition to the little place where they stayed, he was a welcome guest.

Now, the thing with books was that they actually came with two unforeseen problems. They cost a lot of money and they needed space, and Soseki had to admit that he was rather poor in both.

He had already left his last lodgings for a significantly cheaper room. One that came with practising a lot of self-denial, to put it lightly. It was supposed to put him into a position of spending his money a little more freely for his leisure instead of constantly worrying about rent.

This new apartment only solved part of his problems, and only for so long, though. Even after moving, his stipend didn't grow, of course, and the space was quickly occupied by all the reading material he had already collected during his stay in London.

One day, after almost getting buried under one of the piles of books toppled over by his cat when climbing onto them while he was trying to calculate how much money was left to buy himself dinner tonight, Soseki came to the painful conclusion that moving lodgings wasn't the ultimate solution to all of his dilemmas.

Luckily, his neighbour in this humble abode was William Shakespeare; a (claimed) prestigious actor and student of the great bard's words. Catching Soseki during his intense brooding session, he offered him a solution that was as easy as it was efficient.

Thus, the Japanese student was introduced to the wonderful world of pawnshops. Leaving books in the care of the friendly man behind the counter in exchange for a little money and space in his room, sometimes even taking some new ones back with him, would become a regular pastime for him after that.

Soseki decided that this place would be his second favourite location in London, right after the cheap second-hand bookstore he had found close to Briar Road, and he appreciated his neighbour accompanying him on any of his visits.

It made him so euphoric that there was such an easy way to solve his problems that he happily paid himself for the dinner for two that he was promised by Shakespeare right after their visit to the shop.

On this particular February day, the two of them once again found themselves in the cramped confines of the pawnbroker.

Soseki was waiting a little anxiously for the corpulent owner to inspect the books he had brought. Some of his finest. As reluctant as he was to part from them, he desperately needed the money. He only paid attention to his companion again once the pawnbroker had shuffled into the backroom. Shakespeare was occupying himself with the shelves close by the door, looking quite bored while picking up an item every now and then and putting it back again.

His blue eyes lit up with a gleam of excitement at the sight of one particular thing though, and he let whatever it was slip into his puffy sleeve.

"W-wait, wait, wait, WHAT are you doing?!", Soseki hissed in a low voice, adamant to keep it down so the owner wouldn't hear him. He struggled being unable to control his disbelief completely as he rushed over.

"Oh? Sire, I am m'rely doing a little shopping of mine own!" Shakespeare responded with such a bright, joyful smile that the complete absence of any guilt made Soseki's face turn red from anger.

"Shopping?! You mean *shoplifting*!"

"Prithee, dost thou expect me to truly shun an opportunity so fortunately granted to me? "*Who seeks and will not take when once 'tis offered, shall never find it more.*" How rude thou art!" Then he actually had the audacity to shake his head at Soseki. "This hasn't been a problem all the oth'r times, wherefore now I doth wond'r?"

"The other...?" Soseki blinked before he connected the pieces in his head. "Did you just... *use* me? All this time, was I just

WRITTEN BY MINA

a distraction for you to *steal* from the pawnbroker?"

"Nay, nay, I would nev'r! At each moment I bethought of us as equal in our mutual endeav'r's! Thou makest space and receivest the coin so dearly needed while I take some things from this place too valuable to be lost to the dust and clutter." He made a gesturing move with his sceptre around the room. "Behold!" Soseki raised an eyebrow, confused about what he was implying.

"Dost thou expect for *all* this to be sold? Nay, sire, some of these shall simply be occulted in the backs of these shelves, unseen behind the less intriguing objects. The greatest treasures, once precious mem'ries, forever lost in the depths of this humble abode! Dost that not cause thee to feel?" Looking at the floor, he put one hand to his chest. "I ensure thee 'tis no mere selfishness motivating mine haply questionable deeds. I am acting from the sheer kindness of mine angelic heart, saving all these once precious mem'ries from such dire fate."

Soseki stared at him unimpressed, crossing his arms with a deep pout. To emphasise his explanation, Shakespeare thrusted the item he hid earlier into his face. "See there! This fountain quill, wont to write the most heartfelt of poems, perchance, now doomed to disappear amongst cheap embellishment. Wouldst thou not agree that it is still destined for more?"

"W-Well, if you put it that way..." Captivated, Soseki stared at the deep black colour and elaborate silver pattern.

He still used a brush and inkwell like he had all his life, but this was the tool of a proper English author, right? Perhaps, just maybe, this was the one lack in his workmanship that separated him from their world and prevented him from becoming a real writer? He didn't

have the money to spare to buy one, but perhaps if he...

Soseki shook his head vigorously, forcefully throwing himself out of his temptation. "No, no, no! Still My point stands! Stealing is stealing! Mr. Pawnbroker has been nothing but kind, we can't just take the things out of his store without paying for them!"

He had ripped the pen out of Shamspeare's hand while talking, and as it turned out, just in time for the pawnbroker to come back into the main room. "So, here's your money and the proof of reservation. You have until—"

"Ah, y-yes, yes, right, thank you for your service, we really need to go, have a nice day, see you soon!" In a flurry of panicked motions, Soseki had bowed exuberantly, grabbed the money and slip of paper, stuffed everything into his pockets, and dragged Shamspeare out of there by the wrist.

He only allowed the two of them to stop when they were several streets away, let go of Shamspeare's wrist and bent forward as he was trying to catch his breath. "Why... Why does everything involving you have to be so... so *nerve-wracking*!?"

Shamspeare, seemingly not faced by the whole ideal at all, smiled down at him. "Tis in mine nature to compose every scene as mem'able as possible! Isn't that what thou wouldst crave from a play of the century?"

Soseki threw him an annoyed glance. "Anyway, we should better get back to Briar Road before—"

While talking, he had stuffed his hands into his pockets to make sure that the money was secured, but he stopped abruptly when his fingers bumped against something that didn't feel like coins at all. Something that shouldn't be there...

With shaking hands, he pulled the dubious item out, *very carefully*, as if he was afraid it would explode between his fingers once he confirmed his suspicion.

For a moment, both of them just stared at the fountain pen without saying a word.

Finally, Shamspeare chuckled. "Marry, sire, I wasn't aware thou had it in thee! I dare say thou hadst me fooled with that small act of thine!"

Soseki's face had lost every bit of colour, and he was trembling so hard that it could almost be felt while standing right next to him. "N-No, no, no! NO! That- That was an accident! I swear!" He grabbed Shamspeare by the arms.

"Shamspeare! You-You know me! You know, I would never do something like this! You would t-testify in my favour, r-right?"

The small chuckle turned into a full, joyful laugh. "Soothe thyself, good neighbour! This dilemma that hath befallen thee is not as dire as thou might fear."

Comfortingly, Shamspeare put a hand on his shoulder and smiled brightly down at him. "If thou showest true honesty, they shall surely let thee walk after a mere few years." He patted his shoulder in a calming gesture before walking past him.

"A-A few years... A few years..." The shaking mess named Soseki Natsume stayed behind, only thrown out of his panicked state when Shamspeare called for him to follow.

He couldn't get a wink of sleep that night. Too suffocating was the fear of being found out and getting caught, and spending the next few years of his life in a British prison or *worse*.

This was another strike of the curse that had befallen him since he came here, he just knew it!

The treacherous, accursed fountain pen was still lying on the edge of the table where he put it when he came home and hadn't dared to touch it ever since. He couldn't see it in the dark, but its presence felt nearly overwhelming. It taunted him, showed him images of his guilt, which, thinking about them with a more logical approach, might have just been sleep-deprived hallucinations, but he saw them clearly!

The police barging into his room, ignoring his pleas of innocence, not believing that he simply had made a mistake. Dragging him by his collar to court where he was declared guilty, and then thrown into a damp, dark, depressing, dismal prison cell where he was locked away to rot - oh, it was all so horrible!

It was only the next day, when looking at it through overtired eyes, that Soseki's nerves didn't rattle his whole body and his heart didn't drum heavily in his chest anymore, but just the normal amount.

Crawling out of bed, he slowly moved closer to the evidence of his accidental crime. Maybe it wasn't too late. If he returned it now and explained the situation, he might still be able to reduce his sentence.

He picked up the fountain pen and studied it closely, slowly running his finger over the pretty silver pattern.

In hindsight, it had been surprisingly easy to take. Having it in his hands now, no sign of any intimidating London police men out for his life in sight, actually felt quite... rewarding. The amount of money he had involuntarily saved could be easily invested into a scrumptious dinner for him and his cat. Or dinner for his cat and more books.

No, no, he should return it! He wasn't a criminal after all and keeping it would make the theft official!

But if no one knew, was it really a crime? If Shamspeare was right and no one would miss the fountain pen when it was gone or would even notice its absence? Hadn't he done a good deed by giving it a new purpose in his possession then?

While deep in undecisive thoughts, Soseki unscrewed the fountain pen to fill it with ink and dragged it over a piece of parchment paper, admiring the beautiful lines. He wouldn't call his handwriting ugly as long as he concentrated on it, but he had never managed to make it look this pretty with brush strokes.

Next to his own fountain pen, he had always wanted a little notebook to write into when he was away from his lodgings, but once again that was an expense he couldn't afford in his situation. With this new method of providing for oneself though, having one some time soon didn't seem like such a far off idea anymore.

Shamspeare surely seemed to know a few tricks of his own that he might be willing to share.

It felt dangerous and nerve-wracking with just a faint touch of excitement under the surface. He had to admit that it even felt a little silly thinking about it. But this fickle thought dug itself out of the depths of his brain and manifested itself more and more.

It would be only for a few necessities every now and then, of course.

But maybe... if worse came to worse and his measly stipend wasn't enough anymore to get by, a career as a thief wasn't such a bad idea.

THE END





A Sombre Letter

Written By Ellory Art By Cas Lynn

Content Warnings:

Mentions of hanging, mentions of corruption through blackmail and intimidation

Mikotoba-sensei,

I will get straight to the point.

I made a grave error in my judgement. I misstepped in a way that has gotten me into serious trouble. I do not wish for this letter to fall into the wrong hands, but there's too much to speak of through one simple telegraph.

I also cannot currently speak to anyone here in London, so this will have to do. I must risk it. In short, I must ask you one last favour.

I desperately must return to Japan. I do not have the funds to purchase even a third class ticket. The Prosecution's Office pays me pennies for hours of labour that make it near impossible to afford my living arrangements as is.

This was not what I expected or wanted.

My desire for justice has led me to yet another terrible decision. I wish I could say I learned my lesson with what measures are appropriate to take to find the truth, but I regret to inform you I am still as flawed as ever, if not worse.

I apologise for rambling. I know I said I'd get straight to the point, but my thoughts are a mess.

I can understand if you decide to throw away this letter and politely let me know not to contact you again, even if you decide that aggression was necessary. I would not blame you if you reacted in anger.

I have been a horrible son to you.

I know I have abused your trust and twisted my desires in the past so I could get here to avenge my father, but I promise I am being honest in this desperate plea for help. Your... friend should be able to verify my claims if you need someone more trustworthy to prove I am not lying.

I have committed a serious crime to assist a widowed mother of two young children. She had stolen a loaf of bread and was caught on the way home. I had hoped to prosecute her with the lightest sentence, but our new superior made it clear that if I didn't go for the maximum punishment, I'd lose my position in a heartbeat.

So...

I did.

I charged her with the crime with the condition that if she could not be proven innocent, she would be hanged. I felt sick and had restless nights filled with guilt as the court date drew closer. She was guilty of stealing the bread, that much is true. Yet...

It felt so, so wrong.

As I laid there pondering my decision, I realised I was worse than her in every way.

I came here to become a better person, not destroy the lives of simple thieves over what I could hardly consider a crime. Oppressing people to keep my position is not who I am.

This is not the role for me or what I desire to make of myself.

Even though I was once lost in my decision of where I wanted my life to go, I never once lost my interest in helping those who were oppressed by the system, and yet I took the role as the oppressor for my apprenticeship.

It makes me sick.

What I once thought was the solution to improve the system has backfired. It has twisted my role as a pawn for the Crown's desires. In Lord van Zieks' words, we had the goal to change the system. I swear on that day we departed, that vow I proclaimed was true. Yet...

We are no better than Lord Stronghart.

Well, perhaps I am not.

As for what I did to get into this mess...

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't believe that a week ago, I had prosecuted a Lord who had assaulted a maid for scrubbing the wrong part of his parlour floor, and yet, he will only be behind bars for half a year.

But this woman was about to be hanged because I was too cowardly to stand up for what was right...

I stared at the fireplace that warmed my lodgings. The crackling of the embers destroying the wood that it fed on echoed in my small flat.

I heard my father's faint voice, scorning me for being such a disgrace to the Asogi name and supporting the system that destroyed his life.

I couldn't handle the guilt, so in a fit of confusion and rage, I threw the photographic evidence into the fire the day before the trial. The conclusive evidence that proved the woman snatched the loaf when the baker wasn't looking.

During the trial, the bobby swore he had given the pictures to me. I accused him of lying to me.

It turns out I am still very good at fibbing. I'm not sure if that fact should make me worry or not. Either way, I got what I wanted. The trial went in circles, and the defence won. I let the jury become perplexed about the situation as they realised that without damning evidence, it was nothing more than a he said she said.

The minute I walked out of the door, my superior snatched my arm to get my attention and pulled me to the side. He told me he knew exactly what I had done and why. Even worse, he revealed the Yard already knew I was lying.

I tried to stay calm as I went home for the night, but as I stepped in the door, I received a telegraph from my superior with the warning that I was going to be arrested for sabotaging evidence, so I fled.

The Yard has the petition for my arrest and have been searching for me far and wide. Apparently, the Yard has destroyed the few items I brought to London in their search for me. Your friend told me they didn't just ransack my living space; they demolished it. I have a feeling

if I stayed behind, I would have been treated the same way as my property, if not worse. Fleeing was the right choice, even if it was a cowardly move on my part.

I am currently hiding in a place you know well. I'm hidden behind that bookcase to the left of the suite, a location I heard you know very well.

I could commit a crime with ease, and yet I still struggle with the consequences of my actions...

I think about the poor woman who was dragged into this propaganda, the fear in her eyes as she realised helping her family would have orphaned her children, the way her eyes teared up when she realised she was proven innocent...

It changed me.

It made me realise that, at heart, I am not a prosecutor. I cannot shoulder the guilt of charging people, no matter the reason, without any doubt or well-intent. Only a select few can prosecute with genuine, pure hearts, and that is not me.

I stand by that this is not a position to help people. If anything, I have become part of the problem. I cannot change the system like this.

When I asked Lord van Zieks about the woman's situation when he came to visit me, he just shook his head and said she was currently walking free. After all, they can't convict her if they don't have evidence, and the jury had agreed she was indeed innocent.

I wouldn't have felt so sick if she just had to spend time in jail for her thievery, but no. They had to use her life to scare the populace to obey.

Perhaps I felt differently then, but...

Deep down, I cannot see someone guilty until proven innocent.

Even fueled by the rage of what I presumed my superior had done, once Naruhodo got in my head that there was no way Lord van Zieks was actually guilty, the words echoed in my head. Though I never wanted to admit it, I knew deep down Naruhodo was right. Yet. I desperately needed to be right. Lord van Zieks had been the only lead I had. How could I have been wrong with years of my dedicated research, but Naruhodo had been right in two weeks?

He must have been wrong....he had to be.

Yet, he was correct. Instead of being fueled by rage and vengeance, he understood the truth was the most important factor in a case.

Out of the two of us, he truly is the more capable lawyer, and I am so proud of him.

Judicial Assistant Mikotoba assisted him to victory, and I'm sure they're doing wonderfully helping dismantle the messy system that is Japan, and I want to help.

I am doing nothing here that helps anyone. There are punishments that match the crimes, and perhaps being in the situation with a clearer head, seeing what I attempted to do to a desperate, starving woman...

I have felt nothing but absolute disgust with my life decisions.

As I started with this letter...

I have gravely mistaken my impact once again.

I must confess, I stayed behind in Britain for a new start. I couldn't look any of you in the eye after what I had done. I was horrified with my actions, and whenever I looked...

Well, even now, whenever I see myself in a mirror, I don't see myself anymore.

There's only a monster posing as Kazuma Asogi.

Maybe the monster would have gone away once I actually made some changes here.

That ended up not being the case. Quite the opposite, if I'm to be honest.

I thought for a while that perhaps we could change the system and that I had made the right decision, but as the Reaper's presence became less of a threat, so did we. Criminal activity has spiked, and the people no longer fear the consequences of committing crimes, and the Crown hates that fact.

I have no influence here. None of us really do...

Lord van Zieks was not thrilled by my actions. He believes I overstepped, yet he promised he would not reveal where I was. He told me that just because he had a change of heart about how he views us, that doesn't mean the rest of the British populace feels the same. Once I'm behind those bars...

I don't wish to end up like my father.

I don't want to be a memory... a victim of corruption.

If I knew I was just losing my badge, I suppose that would be one thing. I could understand that and would have surrendered immediately, yet I have the sinking feeling that if I do surrender, I will not come out of this alive.

Regardless of my woes, I do not regret what I did for that woman. She did not deserve that treatment for living under a failing system and crumbling economy.

Anyway, I humbly ask for your assistance. Please. I may need more than this one simple favour to get back on track, but I promise I will make it up to you.

Can you assist-

“Mr. Asogi.”

Kazuma stops writing his letter with an abrupt halt, turning towards the bookcase as it opens once more. Mr. Holmes stands there, a deep frown on his face, accompanied by a small plush blue rabbit keychain on his shoulders. He glances down at the letter and pulls out his pipe before looking back towards him.

Kazuma raises an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“It’s your fam...” Mr. Holmes stops himself as he places the rabbit on the table. “Friends. They asked to speak to you after I explained your situation to the good doctor.”

Kazuma flips the paper as he leans in, placing his elbow on it so the nosy detective can’t swipe the page from underneath him. “Thank you.”

“Of course. My apologies it took so long to get connected. Getting the signal to Japan proved to be rather difficult...” Mr. Holmes hands over the rabbit keychain with a reassuring smile. “Either way, keep your voice down. Lord van Zieks isn’t sure if the police

will try to search here again. From previous experience, I have a feeling they will be back once more. My good fellow, you aren’t the first person who’s been able to evade arrest because of this room. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Thank you.” Kazuma frowns. “I... I’m very sorry for the trouble. I hope I haven’t put you and Miss Iris in any danger.”

“Don’t be.” Mr. Holmes twists his pipe before exhaling a blow of smoke outside of the closet. “You did the right thing. Before the Reaper, this was commonplace. Justice never came to those who desperately needed it. The truth is, if there’s a reason to oppress someone and a motive to scare the populace, they’ll snatch that opportunity.”

“I suppose I saw that firsthand.”

“Yet, and you went about it the right way. Even if it wasn’t legally correct, it was *morally* correct, my good fellow. Please don’t let it weigh you down for too long.”

Morally correct...



Something about that does ease Kazuma’s guilt as he turns towards the rabbit and Mr. Holmes leaves, closing the bookcase behind him once again. Kazuma places the rabbit down and presses the button to talk.

“Kazuma? Are you there?” Mikotobasensei inquires. “Please say you’re okay.”

“Yes.” Kazuma leans in with a soft smile, hearing his family’s voice once again as he wipes a tear from his eye. “I will get straight to the point. I made a grave error in my judgement. I misstepped in a way that has gotten me into serious trouble...”

The End



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41

THE RETURN OF SUSATO MIKOTOB

Content Warnings:
murder mention

June 10th, 1909

Haori?"

Susato laid on her back, staring up at the ceiling with her wife nestled under the covers beside her.

"Hm?"

"I've been thinking," she exhaled.

Haori opened one eye, propping herself up on her elbow. "About..?"

"The future, mainly. And Ryuutaro."

Years earlier, the two of them had decided that on her return to Japan, Susato would live as Ryuutaro instead. She'd attend university, get married, and live a happy and fulfilling life with Haori.

Once, Ryuutaro worked. It fit perfectly as he navigated his university and career. Though, as the years went by, the persona of Ryuutaro began to fit less. Though she was hoping they'd become one, he became all the accomplishments she desperately wanted under her name. Now that he'd married Haori, her parents kept mentioning the prospect of grandchildren. Although they both wanted children, biological children weren't possible, which left Susato's in-laws constantly breathing down their necks.

"I don't want to be him anymore," Susato admitted. "While he's here, the *real* me feels... far away."

"I see..." Haori hummed thoughtfully. "Getting rid of Ryuutaro... that shouldn't be hard."

"What are you thinking...?"

Even in the dark, Susato could see that Haori was deep in thought, gears turning in her mind. "Well... in books, writers will kill off their characters, right?"

Susato frowned, but nodded.

Where was she going with this?

"It'd be easy to just... kill Ryuutaro."

She sat up in shock at the suggestion, raising an eyebrow when her thoughts recollected. "What do you mean?"

Haori grinned. "We fake his death. You've had attempts made on your life before, so this shouldn't be an issue, right?!"

She nodded with reluctance. In the years she'd spent pursuing her career in Japan, not everybody agreed with the changes she was helping to bring to the judicial system. It was a semi-regular occurrence for her to be cornered in an alley or receive threats in the office mailbox. It got to the point where she

was armed for her safety, keeping a sword at her side.

"So," her lovely wife continued, "Ryuutaro gets murdered. I'll be grieving, of course, so you- Susato- will show up and move in with me."

There was potential to her plan. It wasn't a bad idea, Susato could admit. Haori had a brilliant mind. After a moment, Susato spoke up. "How will we..." She swallowed. "kill him?"

"I have an idea."

The two were up bright and early the next morning, in the faculty wing of Yuumei Imperial University. It'd been years since they'd graduated, but they knew the exact door to knock on.

"Murasame! S- Naruhodou! What brings you here?"

Susato pushed past her father, wincing as he addressed her with his name. Haori followed behind her. "Shut the door." Susato hissed.

Yujin did, and Haori spoke. Her voice was hushed as she uttered her request. "We're killing Ryuutaro. We need to use a corpse."

His eyes widened, and he sat down behind his desk, moving a few papers to the side. "What?!"

Susato took a deep breath. "I wish to live as Susato from now on. We've devised a plan to fake his death."

"And we need a corpse," Haori chimed in. "One that looks similar to Ryuutaro."

He sat still for a moment, expression contemplative as he processed the request. Susato internally prepared herself to argue, making a case for herself in her head.

Yujin sighed, shaking his head. "As a faculty member, I'm afraid I can't let you use a cadaver, especially not for such purposes."

Haori huffed, but she only managed to open her mouth before she was interrupted.

"However, as a father," he continued with a twinkle in his eye, "I know that nobody is in the morgue during lunch. And I know that there's a spare key in the top drawer of this desk."

With that, he stood up and left the room without another word.

Haori immediately made for the desk drawer, picking out the clearly labeled key in question. "Now, we just need to get him."

Susato frowned. "Him?"

"The corpse, Ryuutaro!" She exclaimed, as if it were obvious.

That sent a shiver down Susato's spine. "Oh. I'd rather not call it... him."

"Ah. I'm sorry." Haori pressed her lips to Susato's forehead, the gentle kiss sending heat to her cheeks.

They smuggled it out in a wheelbarrow covered with a linen sheet. It had taken a while to pick the right corpse, but they managed to find one that looked similar enough to Susato. It took a lot of patience, making sure none of the students saw them, but they made a clear cut without any issue.

"It only has to be convincing from a distance," Haori explained in a hushed voice. "Just so there's a body connected to the death."

They wove through side streets, Susato biting her inner cheek trying to prevent herself from yelping every time the wheelbarrow hit

a bump in the road. Haori seemed perfectly at ease, humming softly as she so often did. It was a strange situation they found themselves in, but Haori's pacifist nature was almost unnerving. How could she stay so calm as they strutted down the street in broad daylight with a corpse as if they had just come back from the markets?

"I'll make it look like a poisoning," Haori continued. "That shouldn't be hard..."

Susato nodded. She tried to look away from the wheelbarrow, focusing on Haori instead. Her posture and gait were as relaxed as ever, and a sweet smile was placed on her face. Calmer than she had seen her in months, actually.

Her wife stopped her chattering as she saw Susato's expression. "Susato? Are you alright?"

She nodded again, but the way her eyes flicked about nervously conveyed enough for Haori to guess her thoughts.

"It's alright," she assured, nudging her with her shoulder. "You won't have to deal with the cadaver. You only need to lay low for a few weeks. I think it's best if you stay with Naruhodou-san."

"Right. And- and... when should I, ah... resurface? Mr. Holmes and Iris are on their way to Japan, so... perhaps we could pretend I've been in London all this time!"

Haori nodded excitedly. "That's perfect! You can sneak onto the ship in the port before they disembark."

With a plan set and a stunt double acquired, Susato showed up late at the office. Naruhodou looked up from his desk.

"You're late," he noted.

Susato sighed, but figured she might as well get to the point. "I'm not going to be Ryuutaro anymore."

He blinked as his face fell in shock, jaw hanging open. "What?!"

"I've decided to start living as Susato again."

"I understand." Naruhodou muttered. As he recovered from his shock, he was clearly being genuine. Susato had shared her growing resentment towards Ryuutaro with him before. "And how will you go about that, exactly?"

Sitting down, she explained the plan that she and Haori had discussed.

"And until the ship arrives," she concluded, "I will have to stay with you. Only for a few weeks."

He hummed thoughtfully, stroking his chin. "That wouldn't be too hard. When does this need to happen?"

"Tonight, if possible. I just need to head home and gather my things."

That evening, Susato packed a few bags and kissed Haori goodbye. Still dressed as Ryuutaro, she crossed town. The setting sun painted the sky with streaks of pink and orange, highlighting the few clouds that drifted about lazily. She kept her head down until she reached the Asougi estate, where Naruhodou waited.

He ushered her inside and showed her to an empty room where she could stay. The old home had many such rooms, given that it was meant to house more than one person.

She couldn't help but smile as she changed into her own clothes, happy to finally leave yet another aspect of Ryuutaro behind. Switching

Ryuutaro's clothing for a soft purple kimono felt like heaven, like a snake shedding her skin.

Once she settled in, all she had to do was wait. As hard as it was to lack any control over the plan, Susato managed. The rest of the first night went smoothly, but a letter came the next morning.

It was a simple message from Haori, telling of Ryuutaro's death. He'd dropped dead on his way home from work after opening an envelope laced with poison from an exotic frog.

It was strangely jarring to Susato, even though she knew that nobody had actually been killed. Ryuutaro had been a part of her, whether she liked it or not. Now he was gone, just like that. Soon to become a martyr of a young voice of what stood against Japan's oppressive system, the lingering thought kept coming in.

Will Susato Mikotoba be enough to uphold the legacy Ryuutaro Naruhodou left behind?

Naruhodou-san took the day off from work, to "process the death of his cousin". He worked from home for the day just to keep up appearances, leaving Susato eternally grateful.

Her wife and father visited that evening. Haori's eyes were red from crying, something she'd been good at faking since childhood. Her father, however, appeared genuinely shaken and disheveled, even though he was one of the first to be let in on the plan.

Susato had spent many a night at the office, away from Haori. Although no stranger to being alone overnight, she hugged Haori tightly as soon as she stepped through the door as if they were separated for years. In a way, perhaps they were.

"Just a little longer," Haori assured her, peppering her face with soft kisses. Susato settled into her arms with a sigh, letting her wife's gentle embrace soothe her worries.

The days she spent in the Asougi house seemed to fly past. Although Naruhodou-san went to the office during the day, he always brought some paperwork home for Susato to busy herself with.

When the day finally came, Susato hid inside an empty traveling trunk, exactly like Naruhodou-san had done years ago. Experienced as he was, he snuck her to the docks, where the air smelled of the sea and clamored with life. The trip was painfully bumpy and her shoulder kept digging into a sharp corner, but she kept her focus on what she could hear of the world outside the trunk.

Shouts rang out from all around, but nobody seemed to notice as Naruhodou-san carried the trunk onto the waiting steamship, going against the crowd of people beginning to disembark.

At last, the trunk was gently set down, and the lid opened. Naruhodou-san helped her to her feet, keeping watch as she smoothed out her clothes. She'd picked a rather nice outfit, something that she'd wear when returning home from a long journey.

Naruhodou-san ran off, quickly hiding himself in the crowd of people disembarking. Susato, however, rushed belowdeck.

After searching through many winding hallways, she decided to take a break, leaning against the floral-patterned wall.

A voice boomed from an open cabin door down the hall. "Hurry now, Iris! There's no time to waste!"

"I've been ready! Your things are still everywhere!" A higher, poutier voice retorted.

Susato immediately perked up, poking her head into the cabin. "Mr. Holmes..?"

The man was stooped over a bunk, cramming clothes into a trunk. He turned at the mention of his name. "Ah! Miss Susato!"

"Susie?" A round face peeked out from the top bunk, blue eyes shining and pink curls bouncing.

Susato beamed, clasping her hands together. "Iris!"

The girl hopped down from her bunk, landing on her feet. She towered over Susato now, her thick hair tied back in a bun that could barely contain it all. Rosy coils fell from the bun as she wrapped her arms around Susato.

"My, how you've grown!" She squeezed the girl with a firm grip.

Iris grinned and nodded, looking back at Holmes. "I'm taller than Father now!"

Her eyes widened. "I see! And you're... how old? Seventeen?"

"I just turned eighteen!"

A second pair of arms wrapped around Susato, and the familiar smell of tobacco and old paper quickly enveloped her. "How have you been, Miss Susato? And... what are you doing on the ship? I assumed you'd meet us on the dock."

Susato nudged the door closed using her foot, cutting the cabin off from the hallway. "Ah, I'm here because..."

"Wait!" Iris held up a hand. "Surely it won't be hard to work this one out ourselves!"

Holmes nodded, stepping back as he snapped his fingers. "Well," he began, "Last I knew, you returned to Japan to live as Ryuutaro."

Iris chimed in. "But here you are, dressed as yourself! So clearly, you don't fear being spotted..."

"And since you and Ryuutaro can't exist separately at once," Holmes continued, then pointed to Iris.

"Then there can only be one answer! You don't have to worry about being Ryuutaro anymore! And with you here on the ship, that means..." She paused, scratching her chin. "That means that you must have faked your death as Ryuutaro and are pretending to return from London as yourself!"

Susato's eyes were wide as she looked up at Iris. "That's - exactly what's happening! What an excellent deduction, Iris!"

A proud smile spread across Holmes' face. "I've been teaching her well," he explained. "There will come a day when I'll be too old for detective work, and I fear that day is fast approaching. She'll likely take over the consultancy... at least part-time."

It was true, she realized, Mr. Holmes had visibly aged in the past eight years. His face was a bit wrinkled, and a number of grey hairs had joined the messy blond mop under his hat. Yet, he still held the same youthful twinkle in his eye that Susato had come to know so well.

"Anyways!" He turned on his heel and continued stuffing clothes into the trunk. "Miss Susato, you can carry this trunk, to pass it off as your own luggage."

She frowned as she watched the detective struggle to close the lid over the heap of clothing, raising an eyebrow when he tried to push the pile down by standing on it. His efforts finally ended up successful, and he lifted the trunk and handed it to Susato.

It wasn't too hard to lift, and after a final sweep of the cabin, they disembarked. Their

family was standing on the dock, waiting with smiles and open arms.

"Runo!!" Iris ran to Naruhodou-san, hugging him tightly.

"Oh- Iris!" He hugged her back, looking up at her with wide eyes. "When did you get so tall?"

She chattered happily as Holmes followed her, immediately pulling Yuujin close. "It's been quite a while since we've seen one another, my dear Mikotoba."

Susato's father blushed, a warm smile spreading across his face. "Well then, why don't we pick back up where we left off?"

Before he could say another word, Susato finally descended the gangway, interrupting

the two. "Father!" She put in effort to sound as excited as she could, putting on the voice of someone returning home after nearly a decade.

Thankfully, her father pulled away from Holmes, beaming as he pulled her into a hug. "I've missed you, Susato."

She knew he wasn't faking the tremble in his voice.

"Susato!"

She stepped away from her father, turning just as Haori crashed into her, squeezing her tight. Susato smiled, letting out a happy sigh as she rested her head on Haori's shoulder, looking at the city that rose up before her.

Susato was *home*.

THE END



SUSATO MIKOTOB^A IS INNOCENT!

Written by Trans_Nerd

Content Warnings:
violence, blood, bullying, misogyny

Susato darted behind a bush of hydrangeas as Haori emerged from the classroom.

Susato's skin burned beneath the many layers of the men's college uniform, the summer sun making her sweat. Her heart thumped in her chest as she wondered what her girlfriend would think of her actions.

Susato peeked out from behind the flowers, keeping an eye on Haori while looking around at all of her male classmates.

Haori looked the same as ever, only downtrodden and exhausted. She kept her eyes glued down as she briskly walked away from her class, no doubt leaving before any of her classmates had the chance to talk to her.

One of Haori's classmates was bothering her, and she was too scared to name names no matter how nicely Susato asked.

Susato had decided to take matters into her own hands.

That was why, on that bright, sunny, summer afternoon, Susato found herself dressed as Ryutaro, watching Haori as she walked away. None of her classmates approached her. Instead, the boys lingered in small clusters, some no doubt hurrying off to grab a bite or

get to their next class on time. In one cluster, some of the students laughed amongst themselves.

Susato narrowed her eyes. She'd keep an eye on that bunch.

The next day, Susato went down to Yumei at the same time, careful to blend in with the crowd. She opened up a newspaper and held it in front of her, eyes darting left and right as she looked for her girlfriend.

Right on cue, at the same time as yesterday, the classroom door opened. Haori was the first one out of the classroom, clutching her books tightly to her chest as she walked away as quickly as she could.

Susato felt her heart racing. Haori was walking right in her direction, looking down at her geta as she walked.

Please don't notice me please don't notice me please don't notice—

“Oi, Murasame!”

Haori was standing only a few feet away from Susato. Susato glanced in the direction from which the voice had come—a student a few years older than she, though perhaps still younger than Naruhodo.

Haori tensed. She held her books tighter, knuckles turning white. "W-What?"

"Hey, that's no way to greet an upperclassman," the student said, smirking with a little too much confidence in his voice.

Haori's eyebrows furrowed. "If this is about the mistake I made during the class project, I already apologized—"

"It's just one thing after another with you," the student said, his voice dripping with condescension. He shook his head in disappointment. "Listen, I'm feeling generous, so I'll give you some advice. I know you're trying to do something revolutionary here, but the truth is, you should quit while you're ahead."

Haori's face fell. She frowned. "I—"

"You're obviously struggling to keep up with the rest of us," the student said. He shrugged. "Women are just naturally better suited to different things than men. It's not a bad thing, really. But perhaps you should consider leaving school and becoming a mother. It would suit you well."

"I th-think I'm doing just fine," Haori stammered, her eyes welling up with tears. "I only calculated the wrong number b-because you told me—"

"Don't blame others for your shortcomings, Murasame." The man rolled his eyes and turned away. "You don't belong here. And I'm going to keep reminding you until you get it through that thick skull of yours."

Susato gritted her teeth so hard she thought her molars would shatter. *The nerve of that man! What right did he have to treat Haori that way!?*

Haori ran away, holding her books with one hand and wiping her tears with the other. Susato wanted to chase after her, wanted to hold her in her arms and whisper sweet

nothings in her ear until she calmed down, but she had a bully to tail.

Susato calmly, neatly folded up her newspaper and stealthily followed the student. He was a full head taller, but he would be an easy Susato takedown target, no doubt. He looked light enough to throw and like he hadn't practiced a day of karate.

The Susato takedown, however, was the easy option, and her Haori deserved nothing but the best. Susato wouldn't stoop down to murder, of course; she wasn't a monster. She only needed to make this man scared for his life. She just needed to strike a bit of fear into his heart.

She continued following him, careful not to make a sound. The man continued walking, and Susato realized that he didn't live too far from her house. If she had just taken the opposite fork in the road and then later a right, she would have been home.

Susato watched from behind a tree as the man entered an unassuming house. She took mental note of the route.

=====

Mister Naruhodo, I have a question."

It was another brutally hot day. Even Susato, normally in her heavy kimono, wore a more casual yukata that day. Naruhodo was wearing his old school uniform, the very same style as the one Susato would don again soon.

Naruhodo looked up from his desk and cocked his head to the side. "Is this about one of our new clients?"

"No, not exactly." It had been three days since she first saw the student's face, and every single day, she had gone to Yumei to look at him and make sure she had the right face memorized.

She didn't want to stab the wrong person, after all.

"I was wondering if I might be able to borrow Karuma," Susato said. She folded her hands and looked away.

Naruhodo's eyes widened. His hand flew to the sword on his belt. "It's—Karuma's not mine to lend. You know that."

Susato frowned, nodding stiffly. "I'm sorry to put you in such a difficult position, but... I just don't have anything else sharp to use."

"Why would you possibly need something so sharp?" Naruhodo asked.

Susato pursed her lips. "Um— it's— I-I can't say. But I think Kazuma would approve of it."

"Somehow, that makes it worse," Naruhodo said with a small chuckle. He smiled wistfully as his hand subconsciously came to rest on his armband. "Though I don't suppose you could ask for his approval and expect a timely response."

"Right. I'm sorry to put you in such a difficult position. But I really need it."

"Why?" Naruhodo asked. "What for?"

Susato sighed. "...Please promise you won't tell anyone."

"I promise," Naruhodo said with a simple nod.

"I need to teach a bully a lesson," Susato confessed. She paused. "I'm not going to kill him," she added quickly.

"Revenge?" Naruhodo asked. He leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow. "I didn't take you for the vengeful sort, honestly."

"It's for Haori's sake," Susato said, looking down sadly. "She's being bullied by a classmate who keeps looking down on her. She's

standing up for herself, but this boy doesn't know when to stop being a bother."

Naruhodo raised his hand. "Say no more." He unhooked Karuma from his belt and carefully handed it to Susato with both hands. "This is the heart and soul of the Asogi clan, and though I can't say I approve of your methods... well... I know Kazuma would want me to let you borrow it so long as you keep it in pristine condition."

Susato bowed deeply and accepted the sword. Karuma didn't weigh much, but she understood its weight, her brother figure looking out for her even from abroad. She carefully unsheathed it, remembering all of the times Kazuma had let her practice with it, at first reluctantly and then eagerly. She knew he would trust her with this.

"It's not illegal if you don't get caught," Naruhodo said quickly. He cleared his throat. "But in case you *do* get caught, I'll be right there to defend you."

Susato smiled, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears. "Thank you, Mister Naruhodo."

=====

Susato dressed herself as Ryutaro and made her way onto Yumei's campus ten minutes before Haori's class was set to end. She sat down on a bench, opened her newspaper, and waited for the classroom door to open.

Just as the clock struck twelve, the doors opened, and the chemistry students filed out into the courtyard. Haori, in her conspicuous yellow yukata, left quickly, making her way home before the bully could approach her.

Haori's bully, one of the tallest students in the group, stepped out of the classroom and into the sunlight. Susato spotted him immediately.

As he turned to go home, Susato discarded her newspaper, gripped Karuma at her side, and followed him.

Her footsteps were quiet on the dirt path leading from Yumei into the forest. Her father was likely at home; it was one of his research days. She wouldn't run into him on the path. She prayed she wouldn't run into anyone else at all.

Susato's pace quickened. Her heart raced. She couldn't let the bully get much further or he'd be home. She took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and unsheathed Karuma. It glinted in the sunlight, reflecting her determined face. She wasn't an Asogi and never would be, but in that moment, she had the strength of the Asogi clan on her side.

Susato charged forward.

Just as the man turned his head at the sound of her footfalls, Karuma sliced through his sleeve, spraying blood.

The man's scream pierced the silence of the forest.

"That was for daring to insult my beloved, Haori Murasame," Susato said coldly as the man writhed in agony.

He clutched his arm, hand soaking in his own blood. Susato belatedly realized her uniform had a bit of blood on the sleeve, but that was no matter. Black material didn't stain easily.

"Who the hell are you?" the man shouted. He winced and fell to his knees in pain, still gripping his arm, trying to stop the blood flow.

"I'm Ryuta—" Susato began, only to stop suddenly. She was wearing Ryutaro's outfit, but she was most certainly not acting as Ryutaro. She knew who she was.

She had thought it would be easier to lie about her identity. Perhaps it would have been easier that way.

But if this man was a misogynist, he needed to know it was a young woman who had brought him to his knees.

"I am Susato Mikotoba," she said with confidence.

The man's eyes widened. "Are you... related to... Doctor... Miko..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the student fell onto his side, out cold.

Susato realized with a jolt just how deep the gash ran. Her eyes flitted to the bloody katana in her hand. She stared at it in a mixture of awe and fear. The heart and soul of the Asogi clan was more powerful than she could have imagined.

Susato stared at the man's pathetic body. His blood watered the earth beneath. Part of her wanted to leave him there to rot, but she wasn't so heartless. She was no murderer. If she killed someone, no matter how terrible they were, Haori would be disappointed.

Susato sheathed Karuma and fled the scene. Her feet pounded the gravel as she ran for her house, the foliage around her a blur.

She slid open the door and called out, "Father, come quickly! Someone's hurt!"

Her father looked up from the low table, wide-eyed. He hastily tied his yukata and followed his daughter to the scene. On the way to the student, her father didn't ask any questions. Susato didn't volunteer any answers.

Yujin glanced knowingly between the man lying on the ground and the katana at his daughter's side. He sighed deeply through his nose and out through his mouth. He pressed his hand against the side of the man's neck and, satisfied with the pulse, motioned for his

daughter to pick up his feet while he carried the man beneath the armpits.

The father and daughter haphazardly carried the man back.

"I'll need an exceptionally gifted assistant in treating him," Yujin said once they had crossed the threshold of their home. "Please seek out Murasame. With haste."

Susato nodded. She helped her father set the student on the table and, still dressed as Ryutaro, left for Haori's house.

Susato approached her girlfriend's house only to find her watering a plant outside. Susato recognized it, a toxic one to humans. It was just like Haori to raise a poisonous plant for fun.

Haori's face lit up at the sight of her girlfriend approaching. Susato held Haori's hand, feeling her heart flutter at the way Haori looked at her.

Susato filled her in on the way back home.

"He was attacked!?" Haori exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Susato nodded once.

Haori's eyes drifted to the katana at Susato's side. She glanced sideways at her girlfriend.

Susato felt her heart stop. She gulped.

"Susato..."

"You wouldn't turn me in, would you?" Susato asked, voice cracking.

"Definitely not!" Haori exclaimed. "Why would I ever report you for helping save a poor young man's life?"

Susato looked at Haori, and they shared a conspiratorial smile.

Even as Susato held her girlfriend's hand, smearing it with a man's blood, Haori still loved her.

And as long as Haori still loved her, Susato was still innocent in all the ways that mattered.

THE END



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| Ana | writer | ⌚ Thesomewhatliterateaxolotl | PG. 6 - 11 |
| Arill B | artist | 🐦 arill_b_r | PG. 5, 55 |
| black | artist | 🐦 artist_black | PG. 48 |
| Cas Lynn | artist | 🐦 CassiferLynn | COVERS, PG. 12, 32, 39 |
| Ela | writer | ⌚ ohtobeasruncuntycat | PG. 18 - 23 |
| Ellory | writer | 🐦 Muffin_Writes | PG. 33 - 39 |
| Ferret | artist | 🐦 ferretamazing | PG. 41 |
| InfamouslyDorky | artist | ⌚ infamouslydorky | PG. 16 |
| kazelnoot | artist | 🐦 kazelnoot | PG. 4 |
| Kota | writer | 🐦 AshW1llow | PG. 42 - 47 |
| matchabuns | artist | 🐦 matchabuns | PG. 24 |
| Mina | writer | 🐦 Clouded_Kokoro | PG. 26 - 29 |
| Nelskhi | artist | 🐦 nelskhi | PG. 17, 55 |
| PapayaAyun | artist | 🐦 ayyunsart | PG. 40 |
| Rai | artist | 🐦 auqroix | PG. 25 |
| solarwreathe | artist | 🐦 solarwreathe | PG. 30 |
| SpilledTe | artist | 🐦 Spilled_Te | PG. 54 |
| Trans_Nerd | writer | ✉️ Trans_Nerd | PG. 49 - 53 |
| Valentine | writer | ⌚ myfunnyvalentinebeam | PG. 13 - 15 |
| UnamusedYams | artist | ⌚ unamusedyams | PG. 31 |

**“MAY YOU FEEL THE
JAWS OF THE BEAST
AT YOUR THROAT
EVERY TIME YOU
SWALLOW.”**

Mod Team

| CREDIT NAME | ROLE | SOCIAL MEDIA | OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Sigma | Head Mod | 🐦 ginasusahao | |
| Ellory | Writing Mod | 🐦 Muffin_Writes | ⌚ thelocalmuffin |
| Arill | Graphics Mod | 🐦 arill_b_r | ⌚ arillb |
| Feiyu | Layout Mod | 🐦 _feiyu | ✉️ feiyufly |

